



The Demise of Gospel Preaching in the Modern Evangelical Church

Part 1

by Bob DeWaay

“For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”
(1Corinthians 1:22-24)

Many cultural trends in contemporary evangelicalism are pushing gospel preaching out of churches. People are being asked to make a “decision for Jesus” without being told who Jesus is, what He has done, or why they need Him. In many cases, those who are failing to preach the gospel vehemently deny that they are doing so. This series of articles will suggest a simple remedy to the problem: **gospel preaching**. In part one of this series of articles I will discuss the person and work of Christ. In part two I will discuss what the sinner needs to know about God’s law and the need for repentance. In part three I will discuss the problems with decision theology.^{[ii](#)}

The Gospel in the New Testament

The word “gospel” is a translation of the Greek work *euaggelion* from which we get our English word “evangel.” By definition “evangelical” means those who are committed to the gospel. Therefore, to claim that “evangelicals” are not preaching the gospel is a strong indictment. However, the sad fact is that many are not. To show this we shall examine New Testament gospel preaching and compare it to today’s popular messages in many evangelical churches.

Mark begins his Gospel using the word “gospel”: *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”* (**Mark 1:1**). Right here we learn something about its content - Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah and the Son of God. “Christ” means Messiah. This calls to mind the Old Testament promises such as the one given to Abraham in **Genesis 12:3**. The Jews were looking for one from the tribe of Judah (**Genesis 49:10**) and from the lineage of David (**2Samuel 7:14; Jeremiah 23:5**) who would bring salvation. So the gospel of Jesus Christ includes the idea of the fulfillment of ancient Messianic promises.

Mark also claimed that He is the “Son of God.” Jesus existed as God and with God from all eternity. The gospel writers used Old Testament scripture to prove this. For example, **Psalms 110:1** was quoted several times to prove this: *“The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet’”* Jesus quoted this Psalm in **Matthew 22:42-45** to refute the Pharisees. Jesus asked that since David called Messiah “Lord,” how could he then be David’s son? The answer is that in His deity Christ is pre-existent, thus was David’s Lord; yet in His humanity he was born of a virgin, and was the legal descendant of David. This argument is expanded fully in Matthew, but is contained in Mark’s brief statement about the gospel. Do modern hearers of the gospel need to know who Jesus is? Of course they do! Man’s need has not

changed. Peter quoted **Psalm 110:1** when he preached on Pentecost (**Acts 2:34-36**) making it clear to his hearers that Jesus was “both Lord and Christ.”

Modern Gospel hearers must learn these truths about Jesus: He existed with and as God from all eternity (**John 1:1**), had a supernatural, virgin birth, and lived a sinless life. Thus Jesus is God and man. Just citing the name “Jesus” does not fill in all this information in the minds of contemporary listeners. Perhaps there was a time in America when most people grew up in churches that taught all their members the facts about Jesus. Even then it was not safe to assume that in a large crowd there would not be people who had false ideas about Jesus or no idea at all. Today, given the paganization of America, it is safe to assume that **most** people hearing the name Jesus **do not** know the facts that are necessary for believing the gospel. Mark says that He is the Christ, the Son of God. These terms need to be explained. It is commonly believed that there are many “Christs” (anointed ones) and that all humans are sons of God. We need to show that only Jesus is the Christ and that He uniquely is the Son of God. Sinners do not come pre-equipped with this knowledge.

The Resurrection

The resurrection of Christ was mentioned 19 times in the book of Acts.^[iii] It was the main theme of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. The fact of the bodily resurrection of Christ was the reason why Peter’s hearers were told to repent (**Acts 2:32-38**). When Paul described the content of the gospel, he referred to the resurrection. This passage is fundamental to the Christian gospel:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1Corinthians 15:1-4)

Without the resurrection of Christ there is no gospel! Paul was so emphatic about this, that he also explained the consequences if there were no resurrection: “[I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (**1Corinthians 15:17**). Faith that is not based on the truth of the gospel is worthless.

Paul ties belief in the resurrection of Christ with salvation: “[I]f you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (**Romans 10:9**). Christ in His resurrection conquered sin and death. Therefore we cannot believe that His death avails for our sin problem if we do not believe in the resurrection. When Paul preached the resurrection to the Athenian philosophers they responded negatively: “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, we shall hear you again concerning this” (**Acts 17:32**). This negative reaction did not cause Paul to change his message. As shown in the 1Corinthians 15 passage cited above, Paul preached the resurrection of Christ in Corinth,

his next destination after Athens. Whether sinners like it or not, they cannot be saved unless they trust Christ whom God raised from the dead.

Christ's Substitutionary Death

I mentioned the resurrection first because of the primacy the New Testament gives it in explaining the gospel. Christ's resurrection proves all His claims and demonstrates the efficacy of His death for sins. That Jesus died is not unique. All other founders of religious movements died. Only Christ proved His claims by predicting His own resurrection and then emerging from the tomb and appearing before many credible witnesses. The others died because all sinners die. Jesus was not a sinner and proved it by His resurrection. He died for sins, but not for His own sins - He had none (**Hebrews 4:15**). He died for **our** sins: "*For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit*" (**1Peter 3:18**).

The idea that Christ's death was for our sins is a necessary part of the gospel. In Paul's summary of the gospel in **1Corinthians 15**, he said, "*Christ died for our sins.*" (**Verse 3**). The Bible teaches throughout that the penalty for sin is death. This includes eternal death, away from the presence of God (**2Thessalonians 1:9**). When the gospel is preached, it must be made clear that all are sinners, have broken God's Law, and are liable for eternal punishment. If people do not believe they are truly lost and headed for hell, then they will see no need for Christ's death on their behalf. This is particularly true in our day. People think they have many needs, but they do not think that they are actually headed for hell. Therefore they do not see their true need for the gospel. It is the preacher's duty to make this need clear. Paul preached coming judgment and repentance to philosophers in Athens: "*Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.*" (**Acts 17:30,31**).

The need for a payment for sins is revealed in the blood atonement. Christ's shed blood averts God's wrath. Christ paid the penalty that we owed to God for our sins. This is foundational to the gospel and God's means of justification. Paul makes clear the role of Christ's blood: "*Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him*" (**Romans 5:9**).

Being saved from God's wrath is every human being's most urgent need. How ironic that many fail to preach this for fear of being "irrelevant" to "felt needs." Suppose a man was living in an upper floor of an apartment building and did not know that the building was on fire. Someone who was aware of the fire knocked on the man's door and said, "Sir, I am a Christian and would like to meet your needs, so please tell me what they are." The man says, "Well, actually, I am out of milk and have no transportation. Could you run to the store and get me a gallon of milk?" Would the Christian leave him in danger of perishing while the Christian went off to meet this more "practical" need? Clearly not. How much greater is the danger of facing God's wrath at some unknown but imminent time? We want to be kind to our fellow humans in meeting their needs, but we are cruel if we fail to tell them of their real danger.

When Paul preached, “Christ crucified” (**1Corinthians 1:23**), he included the key facts about who Christ was and what He did, but also included the reason why it was urgent that the facts be believed: we have offended the most holy and awesome God; His wrath is revealed from heaven against our great sin (**Romans 1:18**); Jesus took that wrath upon Himself so that all who believe in Him would be saved from it. Even the most famous verse in the Bible about God’s love mentions averting judgment: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life*” (**John 3:16**). “Not perishing” is about averting God’s wrath as is clear from this verse in the same chapter of John: “*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*” (**John 3:36**). Notice that according to this verse, failure to believe is to be disobedient. The gospel commands people to believe under threat of wrath; it is not some paltry invitation to a happier life.

Many preachers who would cheerfully cite **John 3:16** simultaneously deny that people are in danger of perishing. While visiting another city, I was invited to attend a church service. The pastor confidently assured us that, “God does not punish sin.” Evidently, there are people in churches singing hymns and citing creeds, who are there to be religious, but have no idea of their need for the gospel. If we never were in danger of perishing for all eternity, then what was the point of God sending Jesus to die for us? Although the church mentioned above was obviously a liberal one, far too many “evangelical” churches today simply neglect altogether the truth that God does punish sin. To fail to deny something is not the same as to preach it. “God does punish sin and you need a savior,” is the message that ought to be preached.

In part 2 of this series of articles we will examine the importance of preaching God’s law and repentance as part of gospel proclamation.

End Notes

[i]. See John F. MacArthur, Jr. *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, (Word: Dallas, 1993). MacArthur writes, “Decisionism is the idea that eternal salvation may be secured by the sinner’s own movement toward Christ. A ‘decision for Christ’ is usually signified by some physical or verbal act – raising a hand, walking an aisle, repeating a prayer, signing a card, reciting a pledge, or something similar. If the sinner performs the prescribed activity, he or she is usually pronounced saved and told to claim assurance. The ‘moment of decision’ becomes the ground of the person’s assurance.” 196,197. MacArthur rightly rejects this approach as unbiblical.

[ii]. Acts 1:22; 2:24,31,32; 3:26; 4:2,10,33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:22,30,33,34,37; 17:18,32; 23:6; 26:23.

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